





Royal College of Surgeons

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UNQUALIFIED MEDICAL
PRACTITIONERS
IN THE MIDLANDS.

BY

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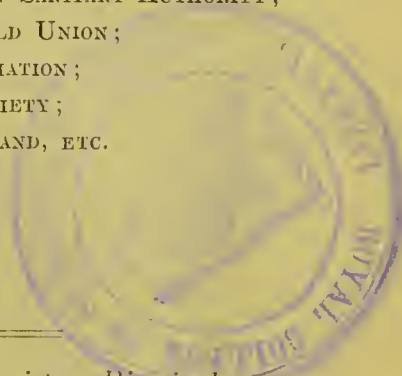
MEDICAL OFFICER OF HEALTH BROWNHILLS URBAN SANITARY AUTHORITY;

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MEMBER SURGICAL SOCIETY OF IRELAND, ETC.



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PREFACE.

Yielding to the earnest request of many, I consented to have this paper published. The subject is one which vitally concerns the medical profession, and is well worthy of the earnest consideration of every medical practitioner who has the true interests of his profession at heart. If I have imperfectly treated the question, I beg the reader will be good enough to remember that this paper was not intended to assume the character of an exhaustive treatise, but was simply meant to convey, in as concise a manner as possible, the ideas and suggestions that presented themselves to the mind of the author.

Brownhills, Walsall,

Feb. 10th, 1881.



UNQUALIFIED MEDICAL PRACTITIONERS.

MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN—

The subject on which I have the honour to address this Society to-night is one well deserving of attention, more especially as it is a question that is occupying a very prominent position in the medical world at the present time, and deeply concerns the well being of our profession.

I do not propose to enter into any very elaborate and lengthened address on the subject, but will simply, in as concise a manner as I can, state what I consider to be a decided grievance in our calling, and one to which a remedy must sooner or later be applied if our honourable profession is to continue to hold that foremost place amongst the learned professions that it is justly entitled to.

It seems to me very strange, nay, absurd indeed, that in the very profession of all others that should be the most strict and conservative, that should be the most jealous and careful of its reputation, that should be more so than any other profession especially watchful of its own

interests and good name. I say it seems absurd that it should be so widely open to the many inroads made upon it, and allowed to remain thus open, without one word of protest from those most deeply interested—I mean the medical profession—and it must strike every one here present that, unless some steps are taken by those most deeply interested, these inroads, which are now comparatively narrow, will become wider and wider, and the medical profession will lapse, I fear, into a less desirable position than even it holds now.

It cannot, I think, be denied that the number of unqualified medical practitioners, not only in the Midlands, but throughout England, is very much on the increase, and is daily growing a matter of deep concern to the general body of the medical profession. No doubt they find that they can ply their illegal calling very profitably in such districts as the Black Country, the Potteries, and other large mining and manufacturing districts, where the great majority of the population are of the lower order, and recognise no distinction between the qualified and unqualified medical practitioner. But why is it that these unqualified medical men thrive and seem to earn a competent livelihood? I fear that the reason is too patent.

Jealousy, always the mark of some error, has long been the acknowledged fault of medical men, and the

mutual jealousy of reputation among the members of the profession has become, I am also sorry to acknowledge, proverbial. I will, to an extent, admit that it could not be otherwise, seeing that they have to deal with a public which has no true standard by which to judge their merits, which cannot distinguish between the pretender and the real man of science, with whom all the unreal accessories of affected manner, boasting, and high-sounding phrases, and the assumed mystery of wisdom, have more weight than the pure dignity and simplicity of true knowledge.

What medical man is there who has not at some time felt the unpleasantness of having to deal with those who have no true standard of judgment, who simply judge of a medical man's capabilities by the amount of medicine he may order for them to consume. No doubt the faults of medical men are in a great measure to be laid at the door of society, and a physically ignorant and incompetent public, such as exists in all manufacturing and thickly-populated districts, are content to be treated by unqualified and ignorant pretenders. But why should we, as a profession, allow these numerous pretenders to thrive in our very midst? Would any of the other learned professions allow such liberties to be taken with their calling? Is a clergyman allowed to minister without being properly

authorised to do so? Can a barrister plead in one of Her Majesty's Courts of Justice without being licensed to do so? Can any man practice the profession of a solicitor without being duly admitted, and claim fees for his services. No, decidedly not ; but the very profession of all others that ought to be the most sacred and exclusive, and should be strictly watchful that no one but those duly licensed and properly trained should practice it, allows every charlatan who comes the way to dub himself doctor, and practice his unlawful calling uninterruptedly right in its very midst.

When I speak of unqualified medical practitioners I wish it to be understood that I do not refer to those who are lawfully endeavouring to qualify for our profession, and who within a reasonable and stated time do qualify themselves, but I refer to those men, (and their name is legion in these Midland districts,) who are and have been openly practising our profession for years, who never intend to qualify, nor have they ever been actuated by so honourable a feeling. Men who have lapsed into what I might call medical drones and chronics ; men whose preliminary education and training have been of the lowest order, and who have turned aside (incapable of passing the very lowest standard of professional examination) from the path of that duty which their profession in its true and highest meaning involved, at

the lure of those monetary rewards, which fall alike to the unjust and just.

Trading, and only trading in the name of science and humanity, they desecrate the one and make sport of the other for their own ignoble ends, using the screen of their ignorant and insufficient knowledge to hide their base, and sometimes successful, endeavours to build a fortune out of the ignorance and superstition of the public whom they plunder.

These are the men who degrade our profession and draw it down to a low level ; these are the men who, as it were, are the mill-stones round the neck of the medical profession ; and what is to be said of those members of our profession who uphold such men, who do not at all consider they are not only injuring their own and their professional brethren's interest, but are hourly and daily violating the sacred rules and principles of the profession they undertook and promised to uphold and preserve ? What is to be said of members of our profession who openly allow their names to be associated with those of unqualified men, and who are not in the least ashamed to join in partnership with such men ? What can be thought of members of our profession who allow unqualified practitioners to use their names indiscriminately for the purpose of sharing the gain that these men acquire from clubs and friendly societies ? or,

further, what language is strong enough for medical practitioners who dispose of practices to unqualified men?

In towns and districts not many miles from hence, there are, I regret to be compelled to state, not a few glaring examples of the kind I have mentioned, and the medical practitioners have allowed, are allowing, and will allow these unlawful and degrading combinations to exist, unless they are aroused from their chronic lethargy. Probably they think that "what's everybody's business is no one's."

A great cause of the lowering of the tone of the profession has been the fact that medical men in large mining and manufacturing districts are so overwhelmed with practice, that they have little time for attending to the moral dignity of themselves or their brethren ; they become too completely absorbed in the practical business of their lives to allow their minds to enter into the all important moral and ethical questions which surround the medical position, but surely such men ought to make some slight effort to uphold the character and dignity of their profession by discountenancing at every opportunity the unqualified medical practitioners who surround them.

There can be no doubt that there is great looseness in the state of the law as regards practice by unqualified

men, and the public are being daily defrauded, and made to believe that they are being served by duly qualified medical practitioners, when, in reality, they are being attended by totally unqualified medical men. In the district where I am Medical Officer of Health I believe I am under the mark when I state that over one-fourth of the deaths returned to me by the registrars are attended by unqualified medical men.

Such evils cry out strongly for a remedy, and I am convinced that nothing short of the unanimous voice of the profession, in the shape of a petition to Parliament, through the General Medical Council, or the British Medical Association, and presented by some influential members of the House, will have the desired effect of remedying the existing state of things. The formation of medico-ethical societies in all large towns and districts would be very beneficial, and would tend to unite the general body of medical practitioners.

In the Medical Bills before Parliament last year I looked in vain for any clauses that would protect the profession from the pestilential crowding in of unqualified medical men.

The unqualified medical practitioner is comparatively unknown both in Ireland and Scotland ; for the former country I can speak from experience, and it may be

safely stated that it is owing to the high moral tone and *esprit de corps* that pervades the profession generally in these countries that such a fact is due ; in Dublin this is especially the case. Unqualified medical practitioners, as I have stated before, degrade our profession, and by their unlawful competition tend to drag down the general practitioner (who, by-the-bye, suffers most from them) to the level of a tradesman; they reduce the standard of fees; their present position having cost them nothing, it is of little moment to them what remuneration they receive for their services, providing they can eke out a comfortable existence, and feel that they walk abroad a doctor. What a disheartening prospect it is for the zealous, hard-working student, who, after his four years of diligent study, whose preliminary and professional education will have cost his family a large sum, who perhaps may have graduated with honours at his final examinations, to find that after he has reached the goal of his ambition, he may perchance settle in a town or district, where, the moment he commences the practice of his profession, he has in open competition with him men of the class I refer to, men who will use every endeavour to make him feel that with them his qualifications and registration stand of little avail.

I am convinced that if the general body of the profession were more united, if they were all actuated

by the one sole desire to uphold the prestige and fair fame of their calling, we would hear less by far of the unqualified practitioner, he would soon become a thing of the past ; if again, they would stand solid and visit with severe censure and condemnation those members of the profession who support and uphold by their names and diplomas unqualified men, in due time we would hear but little of what is at present the acknowledged evil attached to the medical profession.

I am personally aware of members of our profession (and their number I am sorry to say is not a few) who directly encourage unqualified medical practitioners, who support them in order to indirectly oppose and annoy their qualified neighbours, who allow them to use their names at every opportunity in canvassing for minor appointments ; and, forsooth, these are honourable members of our profession, men who would make believe that they have the honour and welfare of their profession strictly at heart, and if they are questioned as to why they do these things, their answer is—Oh ! it makes no matter. Why do you not do the same ?

It is the duty of all medical men to study the ethical and moral laws regulating their profession. If they do not, if they have not sufficient love and reverence for their calling to take due care of its healthy development in themselves and their brethren, when

they break any of its laws it will be little excuse to plead ignorance. The conduct of our professional life is just as difficult in a sense as that of our moral one. To live a virtuous professional life deserves therefore as great admiration and praise as the other, and, indeed, the only true method of attaining a high development of each is by equal regard and attention to the interests of both. But professional morality does not leave it to us as a matter of choice whether we will study the laws regulating the conduct of our calling or not ; it enjoins their careful study on all of us as a duty which we should not shrink from, and which is second in importance to none. If a medical man has not sufficient reverence for his pursuit in life, and disobeys at every moment the principal laws regulating it, if he conscientiously knows that by supporting and recognising the unqualified medical practitioner he is depraving and debasing his own and his profession's good name, it would surely be more consistent on his part were he to openly disassociate himself at once from his professional brethren, and pursue the course of life best suited to him. Still we find him anxiously clinging to the bark he is perpetually endeavouring to sink ; we find him anxious to have his name enrolled amongst the learned societies of his calling ; and, alas ! he is admitted to their council, and he stands a hidden plague-spot in their midst.

Gentlemen, if I have given expression to strong sentiments on what I consider to be a crying evil and grievance in our profession, I beg you will be good enough to remember that I speak as the representative of a district where the abuse of unqualified medical practitioners is very much in the ascendant, and where within a radius of six miles from my residence there are no less than six such unqualified men, supported by qualified practitioners. If this be the proportion in the district I refer to, what may it not be in others where the population is denser. I likewise wish it to be understood that these men are not medical assistants in the sense of the term, but are acting independently, and are openly seeking appointments in their own name ; they have printed notes (which I have seen) with their names inscribed Mr. — Surgeon. In one instance there is an unqualified principal with a qualified assistant.

Competition in the medical profession, as in everything else, is to an extent useful, wholesome and desirable, but it is extremely injurious when it is abused, and when those competing are of the class I mentioned, it is no exaggeration to say it is degrading. Such evils as these cry loudly for a remedy—one thing, however, is wanted—a united profession.

When as a body we begin to realise the many evils that surround us, when we become awakened to the vital

interests involved in the medical position ; when we shall show a determination to uphold, at all risks and at every opportunity, (what ought to be dear to us,) the prestige and fair name of our profession ; when we banish from amidst our ranks that root of all dissension, jealousy ; when we stand solid, and do not allow the many divisions that exist between us to continue, then gentlemen, this plague spot, which is withering the very heart of the profession, will be eradicated.



